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Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Summary record of the 9th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 19 October 1998, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Macedo ..... (Mexico)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Election of officers (*continued*)

1. **Ms. Korpi** (Finland) nominated Mr. Tanoh-Boutchoué (Côte d'Ivoire) for the office of Rapporteur.

2. *Mr. Tanoh-Boutchoué (Côte d'Ivoire) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.*

Agenda item 81: Effects of atomic radiation (*continued*) (A/53/46, A/53/478, A/53/483; A/C.4/53/L.6)

3. **Mr. Skrypko** (Belarus) said that his delegation noted with satisfaction from the report of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (A/53/46) that research on the after-effects of the Chernobyl disaster remained the focus of attention. Contrary to what was stated in paragraph 6 of the report, however, national research conducted by Belarus demonstrated that over 2 million people, including over 500,000 children under the age of 17, living on a quarter of the Republic's territory, had been exposed to radiation; those findings, supported by the results of the international scientific conferences on Chernobyl, showed that not "some individuals", but practically every fifth inhabitant of Belarus had received a high dose of radiation over a protracted period. Over 20 per cent of the land could not be lived on or farmed. The vast scale of the disaster was also demonstrated by a marked increase in infant mortality, a sharp decline in the birth rate, and an increase in the incidence of thyroid cancer and breast cancer; doctors and scientists believed that an epidemic of cancer-related diseases was imminent in Belarus.

4. His delegation welcomed the intention of the Scientific Committee, indicated in paragraph 14 of its report, to produce a review of all the information available on the Chernobyl disaster. It hoped that national research conducted by the countries most affected by the disaster would be used in the preparation of the report, and expressed its readiness to provide the Scientific Committee with comprehensive information.

5. Belarus attached paramount importance to ensuring maximum radiation safety for its citizens. The Chernobyl tragedy had had a negative effect on economic and social life which impeded the creation of favourable conditions for sustainable development in the country as a whole. The Parliament had approved a new state programme to minimize and gradually overcome the after-effects of the Chernobyl accident, covering health care, compensation for material losses and psychological damage, and the construction of new housing.

6. The losses suffered by Belarus as a consequence of the Chernobyl disaster were estimated at $235 billion. Belarus was unable to solve the post-Chernobyl problems alone, and continued to rely on international assistance. It was therefore concerned about donor fatigue, and felt that it was unjustified that the attention of the international community was currently focused more on problems of nuclear safety and closure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant than on the medical, humanitarian, environmental and socio-psychological consequences of the accident. Belarus appealed to States and international organizations for continued assistance to the population of the most affected countries; it was especially interested in receiving the newest technologies for cleaning contaminated soil so that it could be used for agricultural purposes.

7. Belarus was taking steps to streamline its national legislation and help save future generations from similar disasters. In January 1998 two laws had entered into force, on radiation protection of the population and on export control, which established the basis for legislative regulation in ensuring radiation safety and adherence to international standards of nuclear material management and control. A draft law on the use of atomic energy and radiation protection, which would determine the degree of liability for the consequences of the use of ionizing radiation sources, was currently under consideration by the Parliament. In November 1997, the Parliament had ratified the Vienna Convention on Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage, and in September 1998 Belarus had signed the protocol of amendments to that Convention and acceded to the International Convention on Nuclear Safety.

8. He drew attention to the proposal by Belarus to convene an international scientific conference under the aegis of the Scientific Committee to work out a programme of international research on the medical and environmental after-effects of the Chernobyl disaster.

9. His delegation expressed support for maintaining the independent status and functions of the Scientific Committee, as well as its direct reporting arrangements with the General Assembly. It also shared the Scientific Committee's view (A/53/46, para. 13) that there was no need for pre-publication evaluation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or the World Health Organization (WHO), since that could adversely influence the independent status, objectivity and impartiality of the analysis by the Scientific Committee.

10. **Ms. Arystanbekova** (Kazakhstan) said that Kazakhstan was deeply concerned about the effects of atomic radiation because for almost half a century it had had

nuclear weapons deployed on its territory and had been the scene of a large number of nuclear tests, from 29 August 1949 to 29 August 1991, when the President of Kazakhstan had closed the testing ground. The explosions of about 500 nuclear devices had undermined the economy of the Semipalatinsk region, creating a substantial need for humanitarian and social assistance. Since the necessary measures to protect the population had not been taken, 1.6 million people had been subjected to radiation in Kazakhstan. The underground tests had destroyed ecological linkages, accelerating the process of desertification. Large areas of land and water had been contaminated by radiation, and economic activity in the area around the testing ground had been considerably reduced.

11. Kazakhstan was continuing to make enormous efforts to overcome the acute socio-economic, humanitarian and environmental consequences of the nuclear weapons tests. A national nuclear research centre had been established at the former testing ground; other action included the adoption of a law on the rehabilitation of the victims of nuclear tests, the establishment of a medical rehabilitation programme, the launching of a charitable fund, and plans for the construction of an interregional medical rehabilitation centre in Semipalatinsk.

12. Kazakhstan's voluntary renunciation of nuclear weapons and its firm commitment to the non-proliferation regime afforded clear evidence that it was a consistent supporter of the strengthening of regional and global security and resolutely opposed any undermining of the non-proliferation regime. In 1997 and 1998, two international conferences had been held in Kazakhstan on issues relating to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons; the issues considered had included radiation safety and rehabilitation of the territory of the former testing ground.

13. In implementation of General Assembly resolution 52/169 M, an inter-agency mission had been organized at Headquarters, with the participation of experts who had visited the Semipalatinsk region and conducted a comprehensive survey of the consequences of the nuclear tests. The results unambiguously confirmed that a persistently high background level of radiation remained in the region, and that there were serious negative consequences of the nuclear explosions. The experts had also concluded that Kazakhstan needed effective assistance from the international community. She requested Member States, and especially donor countries, to provide Kazakhstan with the necessary financial and technical assistance to rehabilitate the Semipalatinsk region.

14. Kazakhstan had always stated its readiness to provide every possible assistance to the work of the Scientific Committee. In December 1997, with the agreement of officers of the Scientific Committee, it had submitted comprehensive information on the consequences of the nuclear explosions at the Semipalatinsk testing ground for inclusion in the annual report. Unfortunately, there was no reference in that report to the impact of atomic radiation on the health of the inhabitants of Kazakhstan; she requested that that information should be included.

15. The severe consequences of the nuclear tests at Semipalatinsk demonstrated the need for united international efforts to overcome the consequences of large-scale disasters.

16. **Mr. Gehlot** (India) said that atomic energy was becoming increasingly important in improving standards of living and the quality of life, particularly in developing countries. The work of the Scientific Committee was very important for providing an independent perspective on the effects, levels and risks of atomic radiation. India shared the view that IAEA and the Scientific Committee both derived benefits from their respective roles, and therefore supported the inclusion of the seventh and eighth preambular paragraphs in draft resolution A/C.4/53/L.6. It also agreed that it was important to sustain the current functions and independent role of the Scientific Committee, including the current reporting arrangements, and therefore supported the inclusion of operative paragraphs 2 and 4.

17. India supported the Scientific Committee's new programme for reviewing sources of exposure to ionizing radiation, and hoped that more attention would be paid to newly emerging concepts such as radioadaptive response to low doses of ionizing radiation. In that connection, he said that the southern coastal regions of India, particularly the state of Kerala, had very high background levels of radiation, yet fairly dense populations had been living in such areas for over 13 centuries. Studies carried out by his Government did not reveal higher frequencies of micronuclei and chromosomal aberrations in newborn children, or a higher cancer risk among the inhabitants in general. Those observations pointed to the need for further studies on the effects on humans of low chronic exposures and high acute exposures.

18. The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board of India determined the safety standards to be followed, and had the authority to inspect and approve the operations of all nuclear installations. It interacted with international bodies and ensured compliance with the recommendations of the International Commission on Radiation Protection (ICRP).

It was currently increasing its involvement in safety research projects of relevance to regulatory decision-making, and was establishing a safety research institute. Considerable research and development work was devoted to health, safety and environmental problems, and a large number of training and retraining programmes were being organized.

19. **Mr. Hrbáč** (Slovakia) said that the primary focus of the Scientific Committee had been expanded from studying the hazards of environmental radionuclides resulting from the atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons to reviewing and assessing the health risks posed to the world's population by exposure to all sources of radiation. As a country actively pursuing the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and the application of radioisotopes in industry and medicine, Slovakia attached great importance to the Scientific Committee's work, and had been providing it with relevant data as well as making full use of its work.

20. Slovakia welcomed the Committee's latest report (A/53/46) as well as the reports prepared by IAEA (A/53/478) and WHO (A/53/483). Slovakia had consistently advocated the preservation of the Scientific Committee's independent scientific status, and therefore was pleased to learn that IAEA and WHO shared that view. It supported the recommendations contained in the Committee's report, as well as the Committee's intention to continue assessing the levels of exposure of the world's population to ionizing radiation and studying its effects.

21. **Mr. Haggag** (Egypt) expressed appreciation for the excellent work of the Scientific Committee, which was as relevant as ever and should continue. It was to be hoped that its lucid reports would be translated into practical measures for the elimination or reduction of radiation hazards.

22. Atomic energy, applied to peaceful purposes, notably in the fields of agriculture, medicine and industry, could confer great benefits upon humanity. Developing countries should have unrestricted and unconditional access to those benefits, in accordance with Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

23. Egypt continued to advocate the view that the Middle East should be a zone free of nuclear weapons, especially weapons of mass destruction. All existing nuclear facilities located there should be subjected to comprehensive safeguards under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency. In particular, there was a nuclear reactor in Israel that was not subject to any form of international monitoring and constituted a threat to the people of Egypt and the other States in the region. The international community should assume its responsibilities in that connection.

24. Egypt supported the draft resolution on the Scientific Committee and was prepared to strengthen its cooperation with it.

25. **Mr. Islam** (Pakistan) said that the Scientific Committee was to be commended for its enormous contribution to highlighting the adverse effects of atomic radiation on human beings and on the environment, and for its coordination with member States in gathering and presenting valuable information in that area. Pakistan looked forward to the Committee's substantive year 2000 report, and urged it to continue to assess the cancer mortality and incidence data derived from various studies, as well as to review the cellular changes that determined heritable genetic defects. The fact that medical radiation had become the largest source of man-made radiation exposure was a matter of concern, and there was a need to adopt measures against such exposure without interrupting scientific research in nuclear medicine.

26. On previous occasions, Pakistan had emphasized that the Scientific Committee's independence and representative character must not be circumvented by merging it with other institutions or by changing its existing reporting arrangements. Pakistan therefore welcomed the reports of the IAEA and WHO, which contained similar recommendations. In its current form as an independent body, the Scientific Committee should be able to continue to make valuable contributions on the effects of atomic radiation on human beings, and its objectives should remain as originally outlined in General Assembly resolution 913 (X) of 3 December 1955.

27. **Mr. Valle** (Brazil), speaking on behalf of the States members of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), as well as Bolivia and Chile, said that those States particularly welcomed the decision by the Scientific Committee to produce a review, in its year 2000 report, of the effects of radiation resulting from the Chernobyl accident, and hoped that the results of that investigation would add to existing information on persons exposed to atomic radiation. The value of the Committee's work in evaluating the levels and risks of exposure to natural radiation sources should also be emphasized.

28. He was gratified by the Scientific Committee's interest in the views expressed during the fifty-second session of the General Assembly regarding its role and functions in the context of United Nations reform, and also took note of the detailed responses of IAEA and WHO favouring the continuation of the Committee's present reporting arrangements. In conclusion, he was pleased to announce that in addition to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile,

Paraguay and Uruguay had decided to co-sponsor the draft resolution on the effects of atomic radiation.

29. **Mr. Al-Anbuge** (Iraq), referring to an article in the 10 April 1995 issue of *Le Monde diplomatique*, said that United States and British forces had used bombs and shells containing, in all, some 300 tons of depleted uranium in their aggression against Iraq in 1991, violating the Charter of the United Nations and various international treaties and covenants and producing environmental contamination, disease among the civilian population, and further damaging effects which were only beginning to appear. Not only cancer rates, but also the incidence of congenital abnormality, myo- and neuropathy, miscarriage and various other disorders had risen sharply, as a report by the Secretary-General to the Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities had amply documented. The use of depleted uranium weapons by the United States and British forces had been a deliberate exercise in the mass killing of civilians, as the toxic effects of such weapons inevitably extended far beyond the theatre of military operations. The United States and the United Kingdom must bear full responsibility under international law for the grave environmental and health-related effects produced in Iraq by their radioactive armament. The suffering of the current generation was only the beginning; the effects would be felt by future generations as well. Depleted uranium weapons should be banned, and States with stockpiles of them should be required to destroy them immediately.

30. **Mr. Mekdad** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that while the growing use of nuclear power had certainly confronted the world with some potentially serious problems, there could be no doubt that the peaceful use of atomic energy could be greatly beneficial to humanity. The Scientific Committee had done excellent work in investigating the effects of atomic energy and assessing its hazards. Effective cooperation among the various United Nations agencies concerned with the issue should be encouraged.

31. The most effective way to minimize the negative effects of atomic radiation would be to implement agreed-upon multilateral measures to that end, including the standards developed by IAEA. At the same time, the United Nations system should develop future-oriented plans for reducing the gap between the nations of the North and those of the South in the area of technology for the peaceful use of atomic power.

32. The Syrian Arab Republic had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and was strongly in favour of a stronger and more effective system of safeguards. It wished to see the Middle East made a nuclear-weapon-free zone, but that would be impossible as long as Israel continued to possess a massive nuclear arsenal, outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the safeguards system, which it threatened to use to impose the status quo on its neighbours, heedless of the will of the international community. Israel's unilateral development of its military nuclear programme constituted a factor of destabilization and fear in the Middle East, especially given the current situation. Furthermore, Israel's nuclear installations were known to be leaking radiation and liable to cracking, owing to their advanced age, and consequently were a potential source of serious danger to neighbouring countries. The international community should compel Israel to place its nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards.

33. The tragedies of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Chernobyl must never be allowed to happen again, and consequently the Syrian Arab Republic called for the elimination of all stockpiles of nuclear weapons. At the same time, it warned against the attempts by certain countries to attach stringent conditions to the transfer of nuclear technology to countries that wished to use it for peaceful purposes. On the contrary, developing countries should be helped and encouraged to use nuclear technology for peace.

34. Effective international cooperation based on good will was the only way to remove the threat of atomic radiation which faced all humanity, and harness the power of the atom to constructive ends.

35. **Mr. Ovia** (Papua New Guinea) said that Papua New Guinea continued to call for the cessation of nuclear testing in the South Pacific region, and joined the Marshall Islands in urging the Government of the United States of America to compensate the people affected by that Government's previous nuclear testing and to undertake greater efforts to clean up the environment in the region.

36. Papua New Guinea also welcomed the Scientific Committee's report, but reiterated that its mandate should be broadened to include active assistance to those suffering from the effects of atomic radiation. The need for the complete cessation of all nuclear testing and the safe and willing destruction of all nuclear weapons by those possessing them had already been cited by his delegation and others in various forums; in addition, he called on the French authorities to keep the region informed of any new findings and developments arising from the work of scientists in French Polynesia.

37. **Mr. Semenenko** (Ukraine) said that in view of the Scientific Committee's continuing status as the major international body reviewing the effects of exposure of the

world population to all sources of ionizing radiation, his delegation welcomed its decision to include a review of all information available about both local and regional exposures resulting from the Chernobyl accident as a major component of its year 2000 report. The after-effects of the Chernobyl tragedy, including the contamination of the regional environment with dangerous radioisotopes, continued to pose a threat, and Ukraine relied on the assistance of the international community in dealing with the problem. Recent measures taken in that regard gave reason to hope that such international assistance would increase, and would serve as a good example of the international community's ability to confront catastrophes of global dimensions.

38. **The Chairman** informed the Committee that, in addition to the original sponsors, Armenia, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Paraguay, Singapore, the Solomon Islands, and Uruguay had become co-sponsors of draft resolution A/C.4/53/L.6. The sponsors had expressed their wish that the draft resolution should be adopted by the Committee without a vote.

39. *Draft resolution A/C.4/53/L.6 was adopted.*

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.